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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS  
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RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 1112  
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY 5187  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 3934  
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM PRIORITY 0037  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0623  
RUEHML/AMEMBASSY MANILA PRIORITY 0100  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 0590  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0695  
RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY 0043  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0663

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000471

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM, NEA/ELA, DRL FOR BARGHOUT, G/TIP FOR  
CHATTERJI  
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PBTS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [SMIG](#) [KWMN](#) [KTIP](#)  
IZ, SY  
SUBJECT: WOMEN STRUGGLE FOR REFUGE IN DAMASCUS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 00062  
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 00434

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Emboffs joined lawyer and civil society activist Daad Mousa (strictly protect) in a visit to the Oasis Trust women's shelter on June 25 to discuss trafficking and abuse of women in Syria. Administered by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd (SGS), the shelter is a refuge for female victims of domestic abuse, forced prostitution, trafficking, and other socially repressive situations. SGS also operates a 24-hour women's help hotline and works in a local women's prison. The SARG has afforded SGS certain privileges to work with women. End Summary.

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Oasis Trust Shelter  
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[1](#)2. (C) The Oasis Trust shelter has a maximum capacity of 25 women, plus their children. Women at the shelter, 60 percent of whom are Iraqi, seek refuge from trafficking, potential "honor killings," according to Sister Hussein of SGS. Between 40 and 50 women who stayed at the shelter so far this year were trafficked from places such as the Philippines, Iraq, Somalia, Palestine, Jordan, and Eastern Europe, reported Mousa. Emboffs met one 12-year-old girl at the shelter, Shahid, who had been trafficked out of Iraq. She was picked up by Syrian authorities two months ago for begging on the street and put in a juvenile detention center. UNHCR officials found the girl and reported her presence to SGS.

[1](#)3. (C) One important role SGS has played in the past was in assisting refugees from the camp in Al-Tanf who come to Damascus to deliver babies (ref B). Palestinian and Iraqi women in the Al-Tanf refugee camp may only stay in the nearby hospital for one day to give birth, and since 2006, 36 have come to the shelter for up to a week for post-natal care. But Sister Hussein told us that policy recently changed, and refugee women would be required to return to Al-Tanf the day after giving birth.

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SGS Work in the Prisons  
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¶4. (SBU) Sister Hussein reported SGS worked with women in Duma prison outside of Damascus. Some of the women were in prison for their own protection with nowhere else to go, while others were arrested for soliciting prostitution. Many mothers have been detained with their children, she reported, and because the prison supplies only water and food, the Sisters provide milk, toiletries, underwear, and child-care items. The Sisters also founded and run a kindergarten in the prison for the children living there.

¶5. (SBU) According to Sister Hussein and Mousa, the SGS had a written, annual agreement with the SARG since 1999 allowing the Sisters to enter the Duma prison. Mousa said the SARG had released women from prison and into the custody of the SGS after permission was granted by the woman herself, the criminal court, and the prison director.

¶6. (C) Sister Theresa from Oasis Hope said there were 375 women in Duma prison, 200 of whom were trafficked from a range of countries, including Peru, Colombia, Ethiopia, Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, Ukraine, and Russia. One was as young as 11, and seven were pregnant.

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Women's Resource Center  
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¶7. (C) Since October 2007, SGS has supported a 24-hour hotline, emergency shelter, and women's resource center near Oasis Trust. The hotline has received calls dealing with problems childraising, spousal abuse, and trafficking, among others, according to Mousa. A phone operator can then refer the caller to a psychiatrist, social worker, or lawyer. The hotline has received about 40 calls a month, over half from Iraqi refugees. This year, the center provided courses on social work and women's rights to 24 staff members.

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Funding and Operations  
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¶8. (SBU) The local SGS Order has received regular donations from Caritas America, Caritas Austria, UNHCR, the Greek Catholic Church, the international SGS organization, several embassies, and private donors. Caritas America has funded training sessions for staff at the women's resource center, but a dispute between Caritas America and Caritas Syria has put those resources on hold. According to Mousa and the SGS, Syria's operation lacked the appropriate financial transparency, causing Caritas America to suspend fund transfers. (Note: The Embassy has nominated eight SGS staff for an International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) for training in women's support services. End Note.)

¶9. (C) Although First Lady Asma Al-Asad verbally endorsed the women's resource center, the center is not a government-recognized NGO. Mousa said the SARG was inconsistent in its cooperation with SGS. The SARG referenced the center in a report about gender violence in Syria, but the Ministry of Information blocked the center from advertising its hotline number on Syrian television. She said the SARG uses Oasis Trust and the resource center to bolster their public image but provides little tangible support.

¶10. (C) The Association for Women's Rural Development (AWRD) operates another shelter above a police station in the Old City. AWRD calls their shelter Oasis of Hope, a name which Mousa claimed AWRD lifted from Oasis Trust, attempting to capitalize on its reputation. She said a group of "high-society women" run Oasis of Hope, and she is skeptical that it is being run well (ref A). (Note: Recently, Conoffs coordinated with the AWRD shelter and secured the placement of a mother with five children, the first referral of an American dual citizen to Oasis of Hope. End Note.)

¶11. (C) Comment: SGS services are essential to the well-being of hundreds of women. Moreover, the Sisters provide important insight into cases of abuse and the status of women's rights in Syria. The SGS perception that the AWRD shelter may be an ineffective hobby of elite women may reflect a broader disagreement over referral systems. Post takes SGS concerns seriously since AWRD works with the International Office of Migration (IOM) in administering the new shelter for victims of trafficking, a project indirectly supported with USG funding (ref A).

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